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# The Theme of Marginality and Techniques of Coping with it in Doris Lessing's Fiction

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**Introduction**

Doris Lessing is a name to be reckoned with in the history of post war English fiction. Described as the most fearless woman novelist in the world, unabashed ex-communist and an uncompromising feminist, Lessing holds a unique place among twentieth century women writers for the sheer number, variety and scope of her work. In her nearly three dozen books, Lessing has experimented with various genres – ranging from social realism to science fiction with brief forays into philosophy and mysticism – and offered a perceptive, though critical, commentary on the socio –political as well as cultural scenario in the post – 1950 world. Born in Kermanshah, Iran in 1919 to British parents, victims of the 1st World War, Lessing grew up in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) from 1923 to 1949 witnessing the illogicalities of discriminatory mechanism in colonial Africa, where her father bought 4000 acres of land for maize farming & failed. Lessing left for England in 1949 with the manuscript of her first novel *The Grass Is Singing* which became an instant success in the literary world. Doris Lessing has shown a committed engagement to diverse concerns of our times for the six decades since 1950. Doris Lessing received the Nobel prize for literature in 2007. She is 93 and lives in London.

**Rationale and Relevance of the Study**

I have been familiar with Doris Lessing as a Post World War II woman fiction writer for the past several years and I got attracted to her work especially because she was labeled as a powerful feminist voice of the twentieth century literature.

Her early work, *The Grass Is Singing (1950),* dealt with racism and unjust treatment meted out to the dispossessed Blacks, the natives of South Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), where she lived from 1923 to 1949 as a member of the White British Community.

I also knew that ever since she came to England and settled there she has been labeled variously, as feminist, as critic of the contemporary oppressive mechanism in society which masquerades as science.

But what fascinated me about Doris Lessing is that even as her critics tried to snare her with labels, she deftly eluded them and nearly for six decades produced extraordinary works that address the most pressing concerns of our times.

No other novelist since D.H. Lawrence to whom her work shows a definite affinity, has explored aspects of love, man-woman relationship and need for empathy for the underdog.

Though she began as a novelist in realist tradition, and though that continues to be an aspect of her writing, it is easy to see that she has experimented with various possibilities of the novel in our times. She has written futuristic novel *Memoirs of a S*urvivor, she has written science fiction C*anopus in Argos*. She has experimented with narrative technique *The Golden Notebook 1962*, so it can only be said that she has given a new dimension to the art of fiction.

Though, as I have said earlier she has been labeled as feminist, Marxist etc., I have all along felt, despite these various positions foisted upon her, there can be discerned from the beginning i.e. *The Grass is Singing* (1950) to the latest and the last work of fiction, *Alfred and Emily(2008),* a constant concern and championship of the oppressed, dispossessed and the destitute. Sometimes this takes shape in the treatment of the individual characters (*The Grass Is Singing*, *The fifth child* and *Ben in the world),* but sometimes, she has the whole mankind on the self-inflicted brink of destruction (*Memoirs of a survivor*). There is also an adherence to the Sufi teachings since mid-sixties, a constant insistence on love, understanding, empathy and compassion.

The term to describe her concern is therefore with people on the margin away from the centre, and yet, I do not think that Doris Lessing is a pessimist or a prophet of doom, she on the other hand seems to explore various possibilities to overcome marginality in her novels and in doing so presents fresh perspectives on the need for understanding, compassion, love and empathy.

I propose to examine Lessing's oeuvre to explore the theme of marginality and to identify the coping techniques suggested in her fiction.

Marginality is a major sociological and post -colonial concern and very much a contemporary issue today.

It talks about the plight of the oppressed and explores the power structure that creates the conditions of the centre and margin. Neither the centre nor the margin is fixed.

Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffith and Helen Tiffin in *Key concepts in Post Colonial Studies* define marginality 'Being on the margin, marginal. The perception

and description of experience as ‘marginal’ is a consequence of the binaristic structure of various kinds of dominant discourses, such as Patriarchy, Imperialism, and Ethnocentrism which imply that certain forms of experiences are peripheral. Although, the term carries a misleading geometric implication, marginal groups do not necessarily endorse the notion of a fixed centre. Structures of power that are described in terms of 'centre' and 'margin' operate, in reality, in a complex, diffuse and multifaceted way. The marginal, therefore indicates a positionality that is best defined in terms of the limitations of a subjects' access to power. However, marginality as a noun is related to the verb 'to marginalize' and in this sense provides a trap for those involved in resistance by its assumption that power is a function of centrality. This means that such resistance can become a process of replacing the centre rather than deconstructing the binary structure of centre and margins, which is a primary feature of post-colonial discourse. Marginality unintentionally reifies centrality because it is the centre that creates the condition of marginality. In simple terms we could ask who are the marginal? Marginal to what? We might be tempted to reply spontaneously, imperialism marginalizes, the colonized people are marginalized. But they are neither all marginalized nor always marginalized. It is a continuous, processual, working through individuals as well as upon them. It reproduces itself within the very idea of the marginal."

The origin of marginality can be traced in the creation of the 'surplus' in the ancient agrarian society. "People in possession of the surplus acquired the position at the centre, the weaker section was relegated to the periphery, and the weakest were thrown out of the pale of the society." [Dr. B.R. Ambedkar *Castes in India*].

It further led to the historical stratification, viz. Plebeians, Patricians, high-ups in the feudal hierarchy and the Serfs, Brahmins and various categories of lower castes among the Hindus, etc.

To reinforce the stratification certain institutions came to be created, 'Priest' bring one of them. Coercive as well as persuasive methods were used for subjugation. The dominant and oppressive structures of power operative in the society have been Patriarchy, Ethno- centrism and Imperialism.

Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* offers an incisive analysis of the effect of colonization on the nervous system of the colonized.

Mary Wollstonecraft champion of women's liberation movement in *TheVindication Of The Rights Of Women* (1792) talks about the subordinate status of women in the contemporary society.

Joseph 'Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* makes a taciturnly eloquent comment on the process of colonization in the Dark Continent of Africa, 1901.

Marginality existed in Biblical times. Children of Israel were enslaved by the Egyptian pharaoh. Human history is replete with instances of exploitation and discrimination. The inhuman institution of gladiators was rampant in ancient Rome.

However, the theme of resistance brings dignity to the seamy tale of oppression. Spartacus rebelled against the institution of gladiators.

Modernity led to an awakening and the oppressed stood up to the injustice meted out to them. Resistance of oppression manifested itself through Feminism, Marxism, Abolitionist movement etc.

'Black is Beautiful' by Martin Luther King Jr's defiance of the supremacy of the Caucasian 'Bluest Eye' is a triumph as powerful as mythical Moses journeying over to the promised land.

Marginality is an intriguing phenomenon where neither the centre nor the margin is fixed. J.M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* amply testifies the same.

One witnesses a complete reversal in the colonial situation in South Africa in the post - apartheid period. The whites are dominated by the blacks.

Thus the theme of marginality is not only a problem of the past but a very post-colonial concern and calls for deeper investigation with a view to finding a panacea to the problem. In the 21$^{stCentury}$ multi-cultural, globalized world, where commerce overtakes all human concerns and morality is likely to be reduced to a mere expediency, probing the issue not only becomes relevant but also increasingly pressing and unavoidable for the moral progress of the human civilization.

The study aims to add some fresh perspectives to the existing corpus on the study of marginality and coping methods

**A. Survey of Literature :** work done in the research area and the need for more research.

1) Robert Taubman in *Pelican Guide to English Literature 8, The Present*- offers critique on Doris Lessing and Nadine Gordimer. Both have spoken about their African experiences, Gordimer concentrates on South Africa, Lessing though begins in Africa, later deals with diverse issues. He comments on *Children of Violence* Quintet (1952-1959) and *The Golden Notebook* (1962) as Feminist

works. He considers *Canopus in Argos* the work of Science- fiction, as theme of colonization revisited.

2) Lorna Sage is an eminent critic of Doris Lessing who has critically commented on over eighteen novels. She talks about the exilic status of Lessing, in South Rhodesia in 1940's and in England in the post war period. She traces thematic continuities in her works. She has considered Children of Violence series [*Martha Quest, A Proper Marriage, Ripple in the Storm, Landlocked and The Four Gated City*] Canopus in Argos, five novels. *The Golden Notebook, The Grass Is Singing, Retreat to Innocence*, and some African short stories for her critique. It is an enlightening work on Doris Lessing's fiction upto 1981.
3) Paul Schlueter, is yet another critic, who tries to connect autobiographical element with the fictional work of Doris Lessing.
4) Jeannet King has written on the Inner space fiction, *Briefing for* a *Descent into the Hell, Memories of a Survivor and The Four Gated City.*
5) R.P. Mahto's critical work on Post War novelist (Prestige Books) offers a chapter on Doris Lessing. Mahto establishes Doris Lessing as a writer in Humanism along with literacy personalities like William Golding, Kinsley Amis, Iris Murdoch.
6) Tapan Ghosh's critical work on The Golden Notebook – offers a critical analysis of the novel as a feminist work. He says, Lessing's free women are far more liberated than Ibsen's Nora on Shaw's Candida and yet feel trapped, justifying the statement made by Saul Green, a character from *The Golden Notebook*, "the biggest revolution of our times is the sex revolution".
7) Mr.Ram Badode from Bombay University has done his research on 'Sufism' in Doris Lessing's fiction.' – Source : internet.
8) Celine D. from Mahatma Gandhi University has written on Marxism in Doris Lessing's fiction. – Source : internet.

However Lessing's fiction has invited lot of critical work, yet the area of my research 'Marginality and coping techniques' hasn't been explored in depth. I am confident my work will add fresh perspective to the existing body of critical work hitherto done.

**Aims and Objectives of Study**

1 to explore the element of marginality in Doris Lessing's Fiction

2 to identify the coping techniques suggested by her

**Hypothesis**

Element of Marginality and techniques of coping with it exist in Doris Lessing's Fiction.

**Scope and Limitations of Study**

The research aims at the detailed study of Doris Lessing's Fiction mentioned in the scheme of chapters with a specific view to identifying the theme of marginality and coping techniques suggested in them. In addition to the above, there is also an effort to put thrust on the analysis of power structure as evolving in the relationships.

Besides analyzing marginality, theme of Feminism, Marxism, Sufism, Anti – Psychiatry proposed by R.D Laing would also be touched upon for analyzing the coping techniques.

**The Methodology and Techniques to be used**

Detailed textual study of the novels mentioned would be undertaken. I will access information through Internet, various libraries, films, audios, videos and interviews of Doris Lessing's fiction.

**Scheme of chapters**

**Chapter-I**

**Introduction :** Doris Lessing is an eminent woman novelist of the post war English fiction, labeled variously as feminist, Marxist, Sufi etc. She has shown a committed engagement to diverse concerns of our times for the six decades since 1950.

Born in Kermanshah, Iran in 1919 to British parents, victims of the 1st World War, Lessing grew up in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) where her father bought 4000 acres of land for maize farming & failed. 1923 to 1949, Lessing experienced the illogicalities of discriminatory mechanism in colonial Africa. However, the majestic beauty of the African landscape remained a source of exhilaration in her writing.

In *The Grass Is Singing*, *Children of violence* quintet, Lessing talks about the plight of the African natives. She questions patriarchy, ethnocentrism & imperialism, the dominant discourses of marginality.

She asserted the women's rights in *The Golden Notebook* 1962, *Summer before the Dark* and *The Cleft* 2003.

Environmental concern is raised in *Memories of a survivor*, Geriatric issue is discussed in the *Diary of Jane Somers*, problem of terrorism is dealt with in *The Good-Terrorist*. Lessing has dealt with diverse concerns and experimented with the narrative technique and thus added a dimension to the Art of fiction.

Despite being labeled as Feminist, Marxist etc, her empathy for the underdog remains her prime concern since 1950, *The Grass is singing* to *Alfred & Emily*, her last literary work 2008. Her concern for the marginalized is the hallmark of her writing.

Marginality is a major sociological concern, it existed in the past and is quite a contemporary issue. Patriarchy, ethnocentrism, imperialism are the dominant discourses, that talk about the oppressive mechanism operative in the given power structure.

Coping techniques bring dignity to the issue. Feminism, Marxism, Abolitionist Movement, Harlem Renaissance, Mau Mau movement, are techniques of resistance, which can be seen as some of the coping techniques.

[ The above mentioned chapter would talk about Doris Lessing's life and work, and an overview of the theme of marginality and the coping techniques.]

## Chapter-II

**The Grass is Singing** - *The Grass is Singing* is a complex novel talking about the plight of a white woman, Mary Turner in colonial Africa. Set in Southern Rhodesia in 1940's, it deals with the racial politics between the White and the Blacks.

Shocked and tormented by a snide remark, questioning her feminine quality of being attractive enough for a man, Mary pushes herself into marriage with Dick Turner, an unsuccessful but a conscientious farmer. Financial crisis compels Mary to remain childless. Poverty stricken, lonely, tortured by the killing heat of the African Veld, She suffers a nervous breakdown. Mary's hatred for the blacks ends in her murder by a farm hand, Moses.

**Five**: - is a collection of short stories.

1) **Home for the Highland cattle :-** it talks about a reformist white immigrant Mrs. Giles, wife of a civil servant in Southern Rhodesia, who makes an effort to bring dignity to the life of the native houseboys.
2) **Ant heap** :- Talks about the half-caste boy being ignored by a white miner Mr. Macintosh who happens to have fathered him. Resistance put up by the half caste is eloquent at the same time, support rendered by the white boy Tommy brings dignity to the struggle put up by the half caste.
3) **Eldorado** :- depicts white man's obsession with gold divination on the south African farm, helplessness of his wife and a subtle rebellion by the adolescent son. However, the story ends with the son stumbling upon the gold mine on the father's farm. Understanding shown by the son restores the father's dignity.
4) **Hunger** :-Hunger for the excitement of the frivolous city life like dance and liquor endangers the life of the Kraal boy, Jabavu, in the colonial setting in Africa. Jabavu experiences spiritual freedom when he gives up selfishness, and resolves to commit himself to the emancipation of the Black masses, exhorted by the Black activist, Mr. Samu.

## Chapter-III

### Briefing for the Descent into Hell

Talks about a professor of classics at Cambridge, Dr. Watkins suffering from amnesia (temporary loss of memory) is identified by the police wandering in a confused state, is put in psychiatric care centre. He is treated by the medicos for madness and is recommended electric shock treatment and lunatic asylum care.The validity and credibility of the science of psychiatry is questioned.Lessing questions comments on the tendency to categorize people as 'misfits' who deviate from the 'norm' of the society. The collective efforts of family and friends enable Watkins to get back his memory.

### Fifth Child

A happy family life of the Lovatts at the turn of the $20^{th}$ century is shattered by the birth of a 'throwback' Neanderthal monster child, the fifth child, Ben Lovatt. The 'not so normal' child is ill-treated and ignored by the (father and siblings) family and is sent to an asylum for the 'unwanted abnormal' children.

However, the mother brings him back, defying the decision of the family.

**Ben in the World**

*Ben in the World* is a sequel to *The Fifth child*. Teenager Ben moves out unassisted in the big, bad world only to be exploited, swindled and taken advantage of. Ben meets some good Samaritans who try to alleviate the situation. Despite the support, Ben meets the tragic end. The novels questions the moral tenets of human civilization.

**Chapter-IV**

**The Cleft :-**

In a mythical women's world, women gave birth to women asexually, a male child is born, disturbing the balance of the woman's world. The novel without characters, talks about the colonization of women by men leading to conflict. Subsequently, the conflict is resolved through cooperation between the sexes.

**The Golden Notebook (1962)**

Talks about the acute anxiety and psychical disintegration suffered by a woman writer, Anna Wulf in the post nuclear Britain.

Anna Wulf, to avoid disintegration of her personality, writes her experiences in four notebooks- Red notebook dealing with her political life, Black Notebook with her African experience, Blue Notebook talks about her sexual life, and Yellow Notebook depicts the life of her alter ego Ella.

The integration is sought in the fifth notebook, the Golden notebook through sexual harmony.

**Chapter-V**

**Memoirs of a Survivor** :- is a futuristic novel depicting the sufferings of the destitute in the midst of scarcity of natural and man-made resources. In the anarchical world, the whole mankind is pushed to the brink of destruction, leading to the dehumanization of the destitute. The callousness of the self serving, privileged class is juxtaposed with the collective action taken by the poor, to overcome the situation.

**Chapter-VI**

**The Good Terrorist :-** Talks about corruption ridden Britain in 1980s during the rule of conservative party under Margaret Thatcher. It is plagued by discrimination of gender, class and race.

Alice Mellings, the Good Terrorist, emboldened by the courage of her convictions, crusades against the injustice meted out to the 'have-nots' or the marginalized by the corrupt and self serving 'establishment.'

**Chapter-VII**

**Conclusions :-** Possible conclusion:-

1) Element of Marginality is seen in her fiction
2) Different types of marginalized characters are seen
3) Coping techniques are also seen in her fiction.
4) Different types of coping techniques are suggested.

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